theories and methodologies

Algorithm and Analogy: Distant Reading in 1598

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THE CHAPTER TITLED THE "READING OF BOOKES" IN FRANCIS MERES'S 1598 *PALLADIS TAMIA* OFFERS TWO COMPETING PRESCRIPTIONS FOR the allocation of readerly attention. The first suggests that too-close reading spoils some books: "As the s[c]ent of spices and flowers is more acceptable somewhat off then close to the nose: so there are some things that please, if they be lightly passed over; which being exactly looked into do loose their grace" (266v). The second reverses that logic by way of a fresh analogy: "Those things that live long, doe not soon spring up: so that worke which thou wouldst have alwaies to be read, ought to be throughly laboured in, and seriouslie scanned" (267r). On the face of it, Meres's book—a six-hundred-and-sixty-five-page-long compendium of moral and practical precepts, each cast in the repetitive syntax of the similitude—is evidently the first sort of text. At once dizzingly various and mind-numbingly repetitive, *Palladis Tamia* is a book to "be lightly passed over"—"scanned" in the modern, not the sixteenth-century, sense of the word. That is certainly the case today, when *Palladis Tamia* is known primarily for a single chapter, "A Comparative Discourse of Our English Poets, with the Greeke, Latine, and Italiane Poets," Meres's pioneering survey of English Renaissance writing, and above all for a handful of sentences in that chapter, which offer a rare glimpse into the early career of William Shakespeare. "As the soule of *Euphorbus* was thought to live in *Pythagoras:* so the sweete wittie soule of *Ovid* lives in mellifluous and honytongued *Shakespeare*," Meres declares. "As *Epius Stolo* said, that the Muses would speake with *Plautus* tongue, if they would speak Latin: so I say that the Muses would speak with *Shakespeares* fine filed phrase, if they would speake English" (281v, 282r).

Such claims identify Meres as a precocious, even prescient, appreciator of Shakespeare's talents; on their own, the claims have been enough to secure the survival of Meres's book. But few have ventured beyond his comments on Shakespeare—and if more had done so, *Palladis Tamia* might have shed what small value it retains. For when Don Cameron Allen subjected *Palladis Tamia* to rigorous

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scrutiny, in the June 1933 issue of *PMLA*, its graces, as Meres warned, were immediately and embarrassingly lost. Comparing the voluminous contents of Meres's book to earlier printed commonplace books of its kind, Allen pronounced it an egregious instance of "sixteenth-century exhibitionism" (425). What the book so misleadingly exhibited was reading itself: "any hypothesis that Meres was a student of classical authors requires evidence of using them at first hand," Allen maintains (420), but the references to Plutarch, Pliny, and Seneca with which *Palladis Tamia* is studded obscure its more immediate debts to Erasmus's *Parabolae* and Ravisius Textor's *Officina*, whose contents Meres shamelessly cribbed, down to the occasional misspelling of proper names. Thanks to the "Comparative Discourse" and his taste for Shakespeare, Meres had long been celebrated as a founding father of English literary criticism, but if that discipline begins with Meres, Allen cautioned, its disciplinary roots were shallow indeed.

Allen doesn't mention this, but had prior critics read *Palladis Tamia* with his diligence, they might have seen a confession hiding in plain sight, at the close of "Reading of Bookes," where Meres refers the curious not to books but to printed catalogs of titles and authors: "As I refer the readers to *Conradus Gesners Bibliotheca* for Latine, Greeke, and Hebrew authors; so for English writers, I refer them to *Andrew Maunsels Catalogue of English bookes*" (266r). Published in 1595, Maunsell's *Catalogue* achieved for the emerging corpus of vernacular print what the Swiss polymath Conrad Gessner's 1545 *Bibliotheca universalis* achieved for the newly printed works of antiquity—that is, the catalog allowed those who consulted it to cite texts they had never read or even seen. Possibly, Meres's vast and seemingly intimate knowledge of the English literature of his time is an illusion, too.

As Francis Meres, so Franco Moretti: what Allen dismisses as "sixteenth-century exhibitionism" looks a lot like twenty-first-century expertise, as Moretti influentially characterized it in his 2013 manifesto, *Distant Reading*. Taking Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* as the exemplary ideal for his new data-driven approach to literary study, he sketches a scholarly program that dispenses almost entirely with the "first hand" use of primary texts:

> The text which is strictly Wallerstein's, his "day of synthesis," occupies one-third of a page, one-quarter, maybe half; the rest are quotations (1,400, in the first volume of *The Modern World-System*). Years of analysis; other people's analysis, which Wallerstein's page synthesizes into a system. . . . [I]f we take this model seriously, the study of world literature will somehow have to reproduce this "page"—which is to say: this relationship between analysis and synthesis—for the literary field. But in that case, literary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become "second hand": a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading.* (48)

Moretti's italics imply that such a study has never yet been attempted—is, indeed, all but unthinkable in the confines of literary scholarship—but Allen's assault on Meres invites us to see distant reading differently, as a return to disciplinary origins, reanimating a once-vital tradition of second- and third-hand reading. The technology that facilitated such reading in the late sixteenth century was not the computer but the book, which had a burgeoning array of paratextual apparatuses and finding aids (Chartier; Stallybrass; Corns; Blair). Renaissance readers may have lacked search engines to speed their way through the burgeoning corpus of printed material, but they possessed in the art of rhetoric—especially, as Walter J. Ong and Peter S. Beal have shown, in its incarnation as Ramist method—a no less programmatic approach to processing linguistic data.

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The sixteenth-century printed commonplace book is, Ann Moss argues, the crowning instance of the systematic rigor and encyclopedic scale to which humanism taught readers to aspire. The genre epitomizes the habits of aggregation and reuse it encouraged. *Palladis Tamia* thus puts *Distant Reading*'s apparent novelty in historical perspective—but *Distant Reading* also helps to illuminate *Palladis Tamia*'s unremarked originality, not as a repository of classical learning but as a theoretical foundation for the study of vernacular literature. Indeed, in a gimmicky conceit, its digestion of commonplace wit and wisdom into similitudes, Meres's volume mounts an implicit (and Morettian) defense of its imitative qualities: *Palladis Tamia* is a monument to the authorizing power of resemblance. Over the past decade, that power has been harnessed by scholars wielding complex algorithms and digital databases to radically revise our understanding of early modern authorship (Vickers; Jackson; Craig and Kinney; Craig). In the most celebrated recent instance, the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare, collaborating with a team of electrical engineers and network analysts, mapped word-adjacency networks in the print corpus of early modern drama to reveal Christopher Marlowe's "undeniable" hand in the three parts of *Henry VI* (Segarra et al. 249). Word-adjacency-networks analysis relies on linguistic redundancy, on the fact that certain lexical choices make others more likely to occur: as Brian Vickers puts it, "one word looks for another" (117). But its application to authorship attribution relies on the further assumption—confirmed by the analysis of uncontested authorial corpora—that those patterns of repetition and resemblance extend across a writerly career: one work by Marlowe (or Shakespeare or George Peele or Thomas Kyd) looks for another. To be an author is to be statistically more like oneself than anyone else.

In this sense, recent advances in digital stylometry confirm the idea of authorial singularity, even as they expand our lists of collaborators and coauthors. Meres's "Comparative Discourse" defines authorship in a different sense, as the achievement of an imitative relation to other authors. The extreme lexical redundancy of *Palladis Tamia*—every *as* looking for and finding its *so*—allows Meres to extend the category of literary authority to include living vernacular writers and to see those writers as existing in meaningful relation to one another. The unexpected fruit of his analogical regime is an expansive and yet self-contained new national tradition: "our English poets." To claim Meres as a distant reader of classical and English Renaissance literature is thus to construe distant reading's affordances differently than Moretti does. For him, distant reading aims at escaping the confines of monolingual literary traditions: "The trouble with close reading," he points out, "is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon" (48). In the case of English Renaissance literature, however, the comparative method that Moretti offers as an antidote to canon-bound close reading has a structural, if not a genetic, relation to the comparative method that helped Meres imagine a canon in the first place. And looking back at Meres through the lens of distant reading might allow us to see that canon, and Shakespeare's place in it, differently: not as a privileged enclave but as a relational network, born from the tireless application of a rhetorical device.

For all its unoriginality, *Palladis Tamia* enjoyed considerable publishing success: it was issued in three editions over as many decades. "If Meres's material was cribbed from standard schoolbooks, were contemporary readers not aware that they had heard it all before? Why was the book popular?" Stephen Orgel wonders. "Were Renaissance readers simply being deceived? Or did they find in the book precisely the force of the *commonplace*, a term that suggests to us a thing not worth

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saying, but implied to the Renaissance a universal truth"? Readers who bought *Palladis Tamia*, Orgel concludes, were not "paying for originality," and this conclusion should not surprise us: a culture in which education consists almost wholly in imitation is one in which novelty will count for relatively little (481). The full title of Meres's book—*Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury, Being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth*—confirms this supposition, for it advertises and likely exaggerates the book's dependence on other sources. "Treasury" gestures to an Erasmian conception of the commonplace book as the storehouse of *copia*, a Latin term signifying both richness and repetition—a paradoxical notion of property that accrues value through reuse, as Kathy Eden has shown. But Meres doesn't simply identify his collection as a reassembly of ancient wisdom, he also brands it as the continuation of an earlier collection, *Politeuphuia: Wits Commonwealth*, published a year before by Nicholas Ling. The association seems to be spurious: when Ling issued *Wits Theatre* in 1599, the new collection made no mention of *Palladis Tamia* (Allot). Meres's exhibitionism, such as it is, aims at the impression not of originality but of likeness.

What gives likeness its charismatic authority? Orgel locates one answer in the imitative ethos of humanist pedagogy; Eden finds another in the Erasmian ideal of tradition as a common intellectual inheritance. We might also look to the authors of Renaissance rhetorical handbooks, for whom similitude was a master trope. Henry Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577) claims it as the "first foundation" of eloquence:

> [F]or when there wanted wordes to expresse the nature of divers things, wise men remembring that many things were very like one to an other, thought it good, to borrow the name of one thing, to expresse another, that did in something resemble it, and so began to use translated speech, and declared their meaning by wordes that made a likely similitude. (Biv)

Over time, Peacham speculates, similitudes proved not merely useful but also pleasurable, bringing "great delectation to the hearers," and orators learned to use them as didactic tools and ornamental devices, "even then when there was no need" (Biv). In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham saves similitude for the end of his lengthy discussion of rhetorical figures, noting its value "as well to a good maker and Poet as to an excellent perswader in prose." By the fashioning of resemblances, "we not onely bewtifie our tale, but also very much inforce and inlarge it." "I say inforce," he adds, "because no one thing more prevaileth with all ordinary judgements than perswasion by *similitude*" (201).

As Peacham and Puttenham remind us, *likeness* is the etymological root of *likelihood* and *liking*; to forge a similitude is to make a simultaneous appeal to plausibility and taste. *Palladis Tamia* redoubles that appeal, prevailing on the reader by the aptness of individual comparisons and by their formal resemblance to one another. The construction of every sentence in the enormous volume—"As [*x*], so [*y*]"—acts as a rhythmic counterpoint to the dizzying array of *x*'s and *y*'s: the sun and God, elephants and the devil, honeycomb and harlots, rhododendrons and the word of God, silkworms and the soul, all heaped together with swallows, swords, gemstones, and panthers, merchants, sailors, lawyers, wise fathers, naughty children, and English poets. In the long run, syntax amounts to argument: how is a world so full of diverse particularities to be brought into comprehensible order except through the assertion of likeness? Renaissance rhetoricians would here recognize the operation of another potent figure, what Peacham calls "compar," or "isocolon" (Kir) and Puttenham "parison," or "the figure of even" (178). Both regard the figure warily, Peacham urging that it must "be tryed by a secreate sense of the eare," not "measured uppon oure fingers" or counted "chyldishe[ly]" out (Kir), and Puttenham warning that al-

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though it "geveth good grace . . . to a prose," the repetition must not be carried "past three or foure at the moste" (178). Meres repeats his "figure of even" some three or four thousand times over the course of *Palladis Tamia*, and the result is indeed less subtle than stultifying.

But what he sacrifices in local interest, he gains in scale: the syntax of similitude affords him something like the iterative power of an algorithm. The comparison isn't as fanciful (or opportunistic) as it might initially appear. Renaissance rhetoricians frequently likened rhetoric to mathematics, as twin arts of measure and proof (Reiss), and Meres seems to have understood the similitude as a quasi-arithmetic function. A year before *Palladis Tamia* appeared in print, in 1597, he published a short and idiosyncratic treatise titled *Gods Arithmeticke*, which claims the fashioning of rhetorical comparisons as the expression of a divine axiom: "Two are better than one" ([1]r). The treatise's ostensible aim is a defense of procreative marriage, but its argument strays quickly into fascinating abstraction, invoking the form of the similitude as proof of the virtues of resemblance, the "heavenly Arithmeticke" that is "the key and entrance into all other Artes and Learning" (7r). Addition and multiplication are divine; subtraction and division are satanic: to perpetuate difference is of the devil, who "is like a Canonstone, that makes two walles of one," while Christ "is like a *Corner stone*, that makes one Wall of two" ([3]v). Meres culls Scripture for figures of the divine mandate to aggregate and accumulate—bunches of grapes, sheaves of wheat, flocks of sheep, troops of horses, and companies of soldiers—offering them as illustrations and as expressions of an apocalyptic hope, it being "given for a signe of Christes governement . . . that thinges of unlike nature should joyn in peace, and couple by his coming" ([3]v). To say that the devil is "like a Canonstone, that makes two walles of one" is thus to undo the devil's work in the act of likening it to something else; to call Christ a "*Corner stone*, that makes one Wall of two" is to herald in verbal form the advent of the kingdom of God. Marriage is the embodiment of that kingdom on Earth, but similitude is the guise it assumes in language.

Gods Arithmeticke reveals an unexpectedly profound impetus for *Palladis Tamia*'s seemingly shallow approach to ancient learning and also for its innovative take on Renaissance writing. In the "Comparative Discourse," the impulse to conjoin unlike things prompts Meres to conceive of English poetry in two different ways, first (in each similitude) as the recapitulation of a fixed canon of classical texts and authors and then (across the whole of the chapter) as a network of imitation, rivalry, and affiliation in the present—that is, as what Moretti calls a "system" (46) and Pierre Bourdieu a "literary field." The "Comparative Discourse" does not solely express the familiar humanist instinct to interpret the present as an imitation of the past, then; it also hints at a perception of sixteenth-century literary culture as intelligible on its own terms and, perhaps, as important on those terms, too. In this regard, the most consequential relations the "Comparative Discourse" forges are not those between a particular ancient writer and a particular modern writer—not, in other words, the similitudes themselves—but the equivalences between the various modern writers in the category Meres dubs "our English poets."

In this early incarnation, the canon of English poetry is remarkably baggy and heterogeneous. Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson are present, along with lesser lights like John Gower, John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, and George Gascoigne, but so are nonentities like "Porter, Wilson, Hathway," "Master Rowley of Pembroke Hall," and "Master Edwards of her Majesty's Chapel" (credited as "the best for *Comedie* amongst us" [*Palladis Tamia* 283v]). Individual similitudes swell into undifferentiated catalogs of proper names, many

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now denizens of what Moretti, following Margaret Cohen, terms the "great unread" (45):

> As these Tragicke Poets flourished in Greece, *Aeschylus, Euripedes, Sophocles, Alexander Aetolus, Achaeus Erithriaeus, Astydamas Atheniensis, Apollodorus Tarsensis, Nicomachus Phrygius, Thespis Atticus,* and *Timon Apolloniates;* and these among the Latines, *Accius, M. Attilius, Pomponius Secundus* and *Seneca*: so these are our best for Tragedie, the Lorde *Buckhurst*, Doctor *Leg* of Cambridge, Doctor *Edes* of Oxforde, maister *Edward Ferris*, the Authour of the *Mirrour for Magistrates, Marlow, Peele, Watson, Kid, Shakespeare, Drayton, Chapman, Decker,* and *Benjamin Johnson*. As *M. Anneus Lucanus* writ two excellent Tragedies, one called *Medea*, the other *de Incendio Troiae cum Priami calamitate*: so Doctor *Leg* hath penned two famous tragedies, y^e^ one of *Richard the 3.* the other of the destruction of *Jerusalem*. (*Palladis Tamia* 283r)

For every instance in which the "Comparative Discourse" confirms our sense of the English canon, there are others that unsettle it: Shakespeare appears here alongside Marlowe and Jonson, but who is Doctor Leg of Cambridge? And why is it Leg's *Richard III*, and not Shakespeare's, that Meres hails as "famous" (283r)?

Such puzzles can sometimes be solved. Thomas Legge was vice chancellor of Cambridge and the author of a well-received Latin tragedy, *Richardus Tertius*, performed at Saint John's College in 1579 and singled out for praise by John Harington, a Cambridge alumnus, in his 1591 "Apologie for Poetrie" (Sutton xiii). Meres, as the title page to *Gods Arithmeticke* boasts, was "M.A. of both Universities," and his canon is tilted toward the productions of university wits. But the prominence he gives to Legge also reminds us that in 1598 the category of "our English poets" still included—was, to an extent, legitimated by the inclusion of—neo-Latin authors. Indeed, from the perspective of 1598, the oddest feature of Meres's "Comparative Discourse" is the attention it lavishes on those writing for the public theaters in London; such writers hardly figure in Puttenham's chapter on "the most commended writers in our English Poesie" in *The Arte of English Poesie* (48–49), written a decade before, a fact that registers the vernacular drama's novelty and lack of pedigree in 1598. Meres seems conscious of these facts: the emphatic "so I say" in his compliment to Shakespeare as the Muses' darling underscores the idiosyncrasy of that judgment, its willful subjectivity.

We don't tend to see Meres's judgment as idiosyncratic today, when the "Comparative Discourse" is all anyone reads of *Palladis Tamia*, and the lines on Shakespeare are all most of those people read of the "Comparative Discourse." Do a routine bit of distant reading—search for Meres or *Palladis Tamia* in the *MLA International Bibliography*—and you find, in addition to the pair of articles by Allen and Orgel, a total of seven journal articles and shorter scholarly notes, six of which focus on references to Shakespeare and his fellow Elizabethan playwrights in the "Comparative Discourse" and one that draws attention to the only other clear reference to Shakespeare elsewhere in *Palladis Tamia*, an allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* in the section on women. In other words, modern scholars attend to those bits of the *Palladis Tamia* that link its otherwise uninteresting contents to the singular person of William Shakespeare and that confirm our faith in that singularity. The "repeated mention" of Shakespeare in Meres's "Comparative Discourse," writes Russ MacDonald in the headnote to his extract from *Palladis Tamia* in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, "is one of the first and strongest indicators of [Shakespeare's] prominence at the end of the 1590s" (32). To read *Palladis Tamia* in this selective fashion is in one sense to remain true to the text's purposes; Meres, it is fair to assume, never imagined anyone reading his book sequentially or comprehensively, and its topic headings and alphabetical index ensure that we don't have to. But citing

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him only to secure our faith in Shakespeare's place at the center of English literary history is also a distortion of the method and substance of his book: for Meres, no literary tradition, no poetic achievement, stands alone. And in the larger whole of the "Comparative Discourse," or in the exponentially larger whole of *Palladis Tamia*, those repeated mentions of Shakespeare aren't nearly as striking—Doctor Leg appears more than once, too.

In 1598 Meres was a notably appreciative reader of Shakespeare's works, but this appreciation was rooted in a kind of reading that looks a lot more like Moretti's readings of Hollywood blockbusters and nineteenth-century detective novels than it does our reverential handling. Indeed, given the quantity of Renaissance writing surveyed in the "Comparative Discourse" (and if we keep in mind Meres's recommendation of Maunsell's *Catalogue* to those pressed for time), it is hard to know what Meres did read of Shakespeare—hard, at least, to maintain that listing a title equates to knowing an entire text. But as Moretti insists, sometimes "[l]ess is more" (49). Meres's "Comparative Discourse" can't match the scale of Moretti's "Style, Inc.: Reflections on 7,000 Titles," the chapter of *Distant Reading* in which quantitative analysis displaces world-systems theory, but Meres's scattershot catalogs capture what Moretti calls "a decisive aspect of quantitative work: what really counts, here, are not a few major and rapid changes, but many small and slow ones" (192). What we ought to credit Meres with, then, isn't his discriminating taste but his indiscriminate appetite, his faith that all comparisons are worth making. "We have never really tried to read the entire volume of the literary past," Moretti observes (210)—but Meres sort of did. If we wish to follow his example, building better algorithms and bigger databases offers one way forward; attending more closely to books we have never known how to read offers another.

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